

Measuring Attractiveness in Accomplished Men: Testing the Proverb *Handsome is as handsome does*

Abstract

The validity of the proverb “handsome is as handsome does” was tested with the following hypothesis: women find men’s accomplishments more attractive than their physical appearance. To test this, a survey was administered to over 3000 women online. The results were that women find accomplished men attractive, unless they are physically unattractive, in which case their overall attractiveness declines significantly. Unaccomplished men were not found attractive, unless they were physically attractive, in which case they were rated favourably by the survey participants. The hypothesis was thus disproved.

Introduction

The proverb *handsome is as handsome does* means that physical attractiveness is not as essential as one’s behaviour. In other words, good deeds or actions are more important than good looks. This proverb first appeared in Chaucer’s ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’ (c. 1387) (Titelman, 1996). It subsequently appeared in various publications throughout the centuries, including John Ray’s 1670 collection of proverbs (Speake, 2003). There are variations on this proverb, including *beauty is as beauty does* and *pretty is as pretty does*, but these variations were not considered in this study.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, the word “*handsome* denotes chivalrous or genteel behaviour, though it is often popularly taken to refer to good looks” (Speake, 2003). For the purpose of this study, the word *handsome* was defined simply as male attractiveness, specifically, the perception of attractiveness in male faces by heterosexual females. In addition to this, the research was limited to the perceptions of women in westernized cultures only.

To determine what constitutes an attractive male face in western culture, established research on this topic was consulted. Previously, researchers at the School of Psychology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland posited that contemporary females actually prefer a slightly feminine male face (Perrett et al, 1998). Researchers in Germany built upon this theory by including symmetry, skin texture, face shape and bone structure into the equation (Braun et al, 2001). Other studies have looked at the effect of the female menstrual cycle and the presence of male pheromones in determining male attractiveness (Havlicek et al, 2005 and Thorne et al, 2002). The effect of the menstrual cycle or pheromones, however, were not considered in this study as there were no face to face meetings in the experimental research conducted.

The research questions were as follows: Do women find men attractive based on their looks, or their accomplishments? If given the choice, will they choose an unattractive accomplished man over an attractive unaccomplished man? What is deemed attractive was based upon the western standards identified by previous researchers. As for accomplishments, they were defined as individual achievements. These achievements included social, financial, or educational successes as laid out in the methods section. It is generally agreed upon in western society that these successes constitute an accomplished man. The purpose of the study was to test the proverb *handsome is as handsome does* to see if it is true. This study was conducted to determine the preferences of women who are interested in securing a mate so that we can better understand their rationales for their choices. The hypothesis was that women find men's accomplishments more attractive than their physical appearance.

Methods

Data was gathered via a survey, described in detail below. The participants in this study were all English speaking heterosexual females between the ages of 17 and 29 who were seeking a mate. The sample of convenience included 3421 (n=3421) females who were members of the popular free online dating service, PlentyofFish (<http://plentyoffish.com>). PlentyofFish is well represented in the English speaking world, predominantly in The U.S.A., Canada and the U.K. An average of 250000 to 320000 people log on to PlentyofFish everyday (Frind, 2006). Selection bias was mediated by the fact that all these women were actively searching for potential mates. Furthermore, there was no monetary incentive to partake in the survey. Although each participant's profile indicated their profession, their socioeconomic status was not taken into account. Plentyoffish is run by the sole proprietor, Marcus Frind, who collaborated generously with us on the project. Mr. Frind gave us full access to the membership database, under the condition that full anonymity was maintained and that we allow him to publish the results of the survey on his site. We randomly selected 4000 females who were registered with the dating service, and fell within the age range of 17 to 29. This age range was chosen to correspond with the photographs of similarly aged male faces that were used in the experiment. This was a single blind study and the females contacted had no idea if they fell within the control or experimental group. We had an 85 % response rate. The control group was comprised of 1658 women (c=1658), while the experimental group consisted of 1763 women (e=1763).

The control group and experimental group were issued different surveys. Each participant in the control group was given six profiles of six different men (See Appendix). The profiles were fictional, but the participants were not aware of this until they were debriefed. Each profile outlined the accomplishments of each fictional man, yet provided no visual image of the man. They were written so that they highlighted educational, financial or social accomplishments, but neglected to mention any physical attributes of the man, or mention at what level of physical fitness they were. Furthermore, three of the profiles were

written to represent extremely accomplished men, and three of the profiles represented relatively unaccomplished men. Each man was rated using a 5 point Likert scale, with 1 being extremely attractive and 5 being extremely unattractive.

The participants in the experimental group were given the same profiles. Again, three of the profiles represented accomplished men, and the three others represented unaccomplished men. This time, however, photographs of each man were attached to each profile. These photographs do not represent real people. They were produced using computer software. Three of them are deliberately attractive, and the other three unattractive. The attractive photographs were attached to the unaccomplished profiles, while the unattractive photos were attached to the accomplished profiles. The photographs used have been proven to represent attractiveness and unattractiveness and were used in a previous study (Braun et al, 2001). Permission to use them for this study was granted by Braun et al. Again, the men were rated on a 5 point Likert scale.

Both the control and experimental group were told these were real men who were also partaking in the study. The participants were told to assess the attractiveness of the men based on the assumption that they might actually date them at some point. To avoid the same participant registering more than once, each Plentyoffish member was tagged with a unique numerical identifier by the software. No names were used and confidentiality was ensured. After the survey was submitted, each participant was immediately debriefed via email. They were told that the men profiled were fictional and the purposes of the study were fully disclosed to them.

Results

The independent variable in this research design was the survey (with the photographs). The experimental group was administered photographs and profiles (I.V.1) To establish a baseline, the control group was given the profiles without the photographs (I.V.0). The hypothesis was that women find men's accomplishments more attractive than their physical appearance. In other words, the highly accomplished men should be highly rated, regardless of their physical appearance.

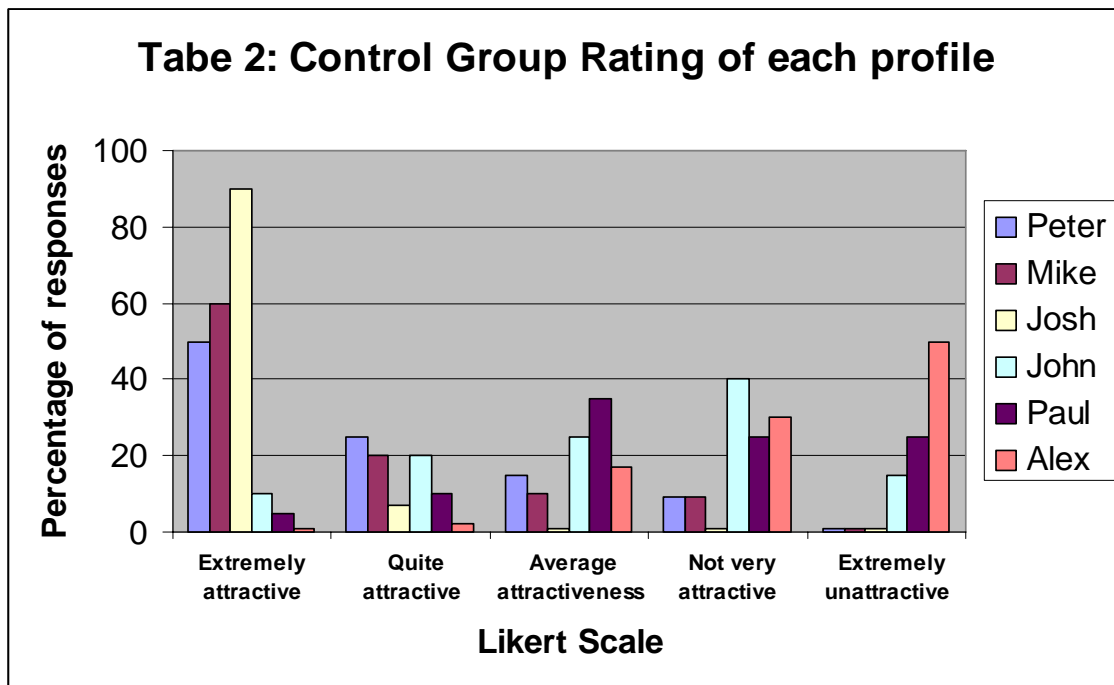
Table 1 represents each profile with their assigned characteristics as revealed to the control and experimental group. The names given are purely fictional, as are the photographs.

Table 1. Profile characteristics

Profile name	Accomplishments [revealed to both control group and experimental]	Physical attractiveness [revealed only to]
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	group]	experimental group]
Peter	Accomplished	Unattractive
Mike		
Josh		
John	Unaccomplished	Attractive
Paul		
Alex		

After conducting the experiment, the results for the control group were as expected. All the accomplished men received higher scores on the Likert scale than the unaccomplished men. Table 2 compares the data between the individual men for the control group responses (c=1658). The control group response data has been collapsed and expressed as a percentage.



It is evident that the majority of the control group considered Peter, Mike and Josh to be extremely attractive. These men all fall under the accomplished category. John, Paul and Alex were rated as average to extremely unattractive, with Alex being the least desirable of the three. These men all fall under the unaccomplished category. By grouping the men under their categories, we can see the shape of the distribution more clearly (see Table 3).

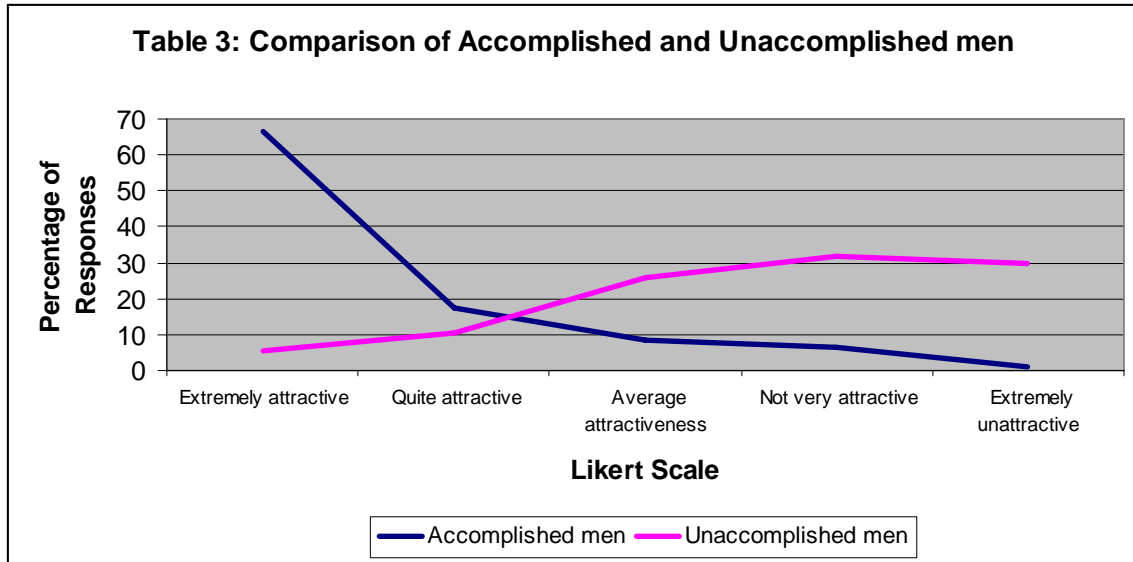


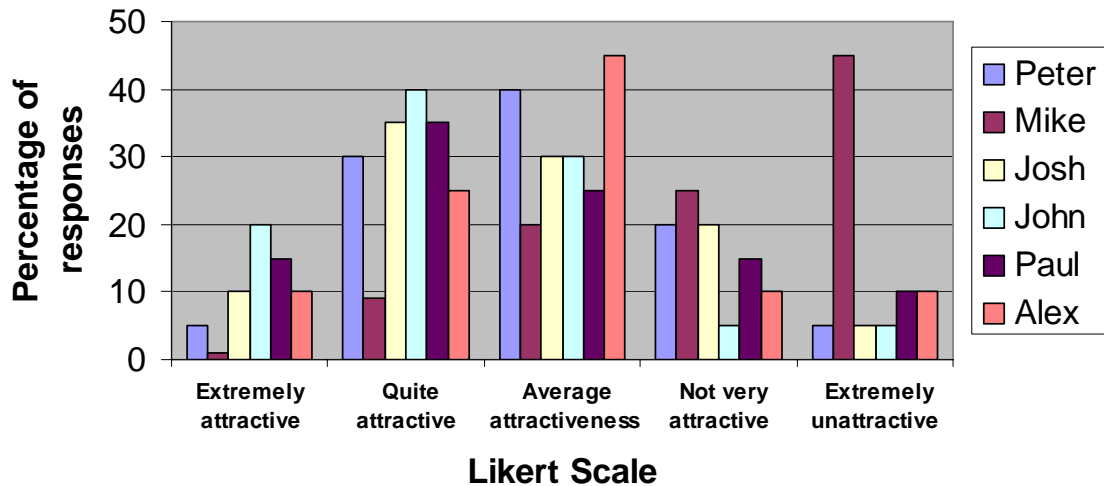
Table 4: Standard Deviations for Control Group Data

	Extremely attractive	Quite attractive	Average attractiveness	Not very attractive	Extremely unattractive
Accomplished men: Standard deviations	20.8	9.29	7.09	4.62	0
Unaccomplished men: Standard deviations	4.51	9.02	9.02	7.64	18

Table 3 groups each men into their appropriate category by averaging their scores. The standard deviation for each data set can be seen in Table 4. The high standard deviations on the extremes of the scale can be accounted for by Josh, who was rated significantly higher than the others and Alex, who was rated as significantly lower than the others. It is clear, however, that the accomplished men fall unequivocally onto the attractive side of the scale, a positive skewed distribution. The unaccomplished men fall onto the unattractive side, a negative skewed distribution, although the majority of women considered them to be “not very attractive” as opposed to “extremely unattractive”. The gradient on this trend was much more gentle than the accomplished men’s gradient. This pattern does not reflect a negative correlation in any way, as there is no relationship between the variables.

After administering the test to the experimental group, the results were as follows. Table 5 shows the experimental group rating of each individual profile and associated photograph.

Table 5: Experimental Group Rating of each profile



The accomplished men are now also physically unattractive (Group 1) and the unaccomplished men are now physically attractive (Group 2).

This change appears to have diminished the Group 1's ratings and bolstered Group 2's ratings. The shape of the distribution appears to be quite different from that of the control group data. Table 6 shows the shape of the experimental group data and table 7 shows the standard deviations.

Table 6: Comparison of Group 1 and Group 2

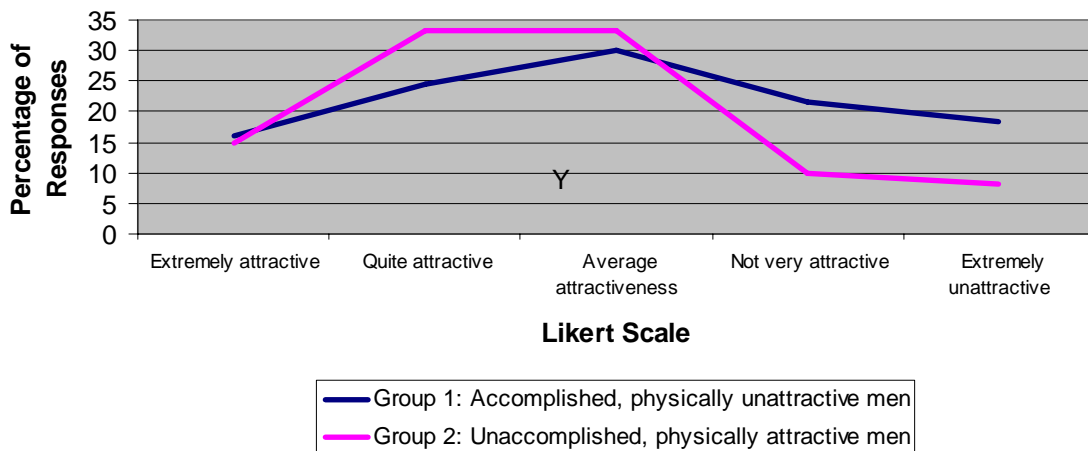


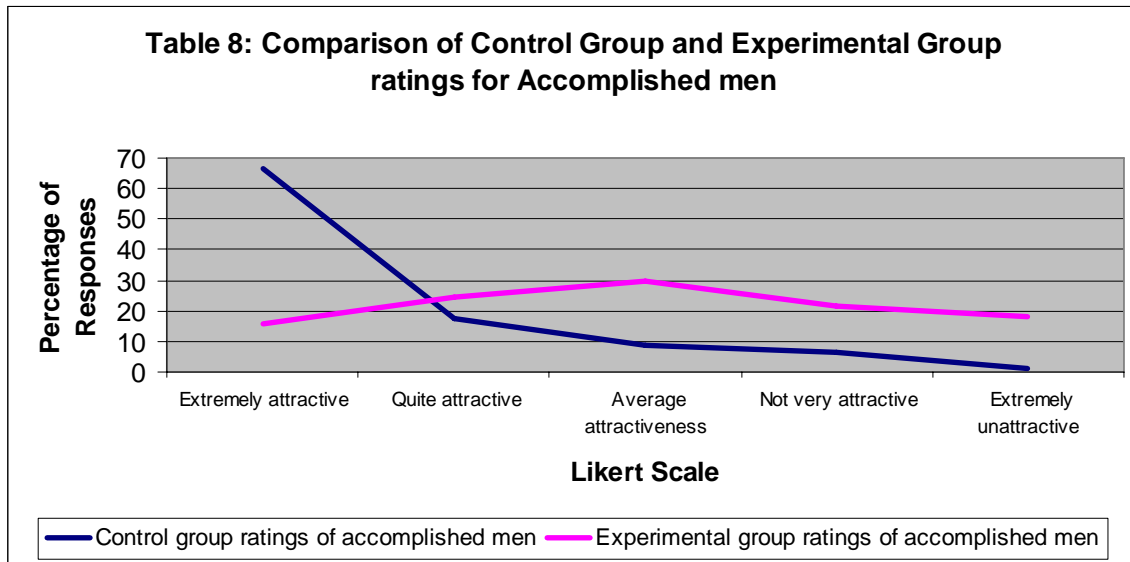
Table 7: Standard deviations for experimental group data

	Extremely attractive	Quite attractive	Average attractiveness	Not very attractive	Extremely unattractive
Group 1: Standard deviations	4.51	13.8	10	2.89	23.1
Group 2: Standard deviations	5	7.64	10.4	5	2.89

Table 6 shows both groups sharing a similar positively skewed shape. What is of note here is that group 2 peaks earlier than group 1. In other words, the unaccomplished, yet physically attractive men have scored higher on the attractiveness scale as the accomplished, yet physically unattractive men. None of the groups were considered “extremely attractive”.

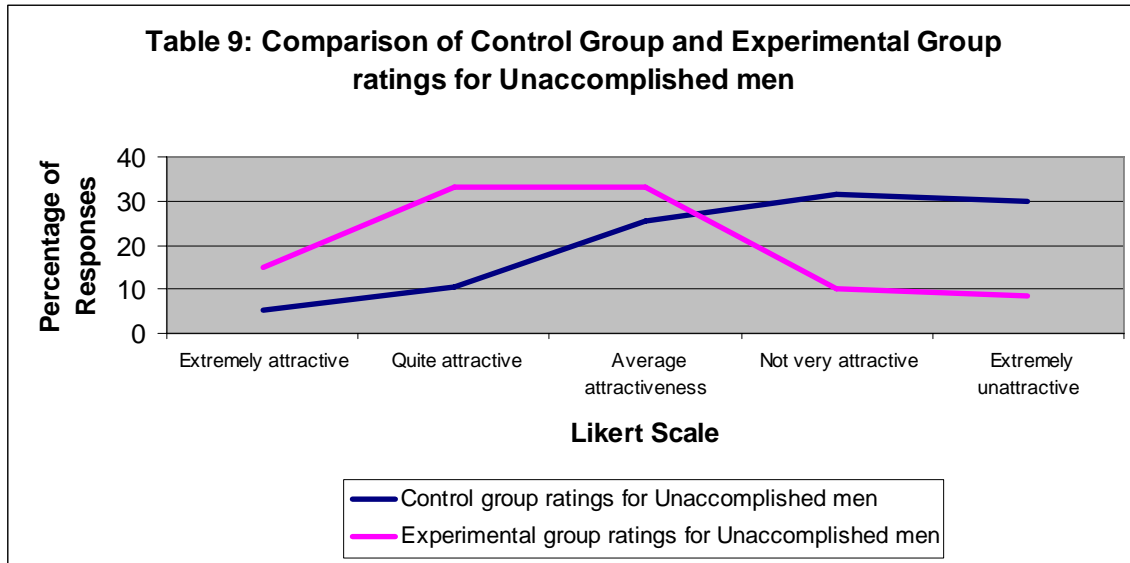
The large standard deviation for Group 1’s “extremely unattractive” data can be accounted for by Mike, who was rated extremely unattractive by 45% of the experimental group.

A comparison of the control group data and experimental group data is instrumental in determining whether the hypothesis can be proved or disproved. Table 8 compares the accomplished men’s ratings from both the control group and experimental group.



Why were the accomplished men deemed highly attractive in the control group and only of average attractiveness in the experimental group? This difference is due to the independent variable of the photographs. This independent variable caused the effect of decreased attractiveness (the dependent variable). The perception of physical unattractiveness caused the men’s perceived attractiveness

overall to decrease significantly, despite their accomplishments. Table 9 compares the control group and experimental group ratings for the unaccomplished men.



The independent variable caused the dependent variable in this case as well. The introduction of photographs actually increased the attractiveness level of unaccomplished men, while simultaneously reducing their level of unattractiveness.

These results were unlikely to have occurred by chance. Assuming a null hypothesis, we ran a statistical significance test. The p-value was smaller than the α -level, thus the null hypothesis can be rejected. The results are thus statistically significant with a 95% confidence level.

Discussion

The results of the survey seem to disprove our hypothesis that women find men's accomplishments more attractive than their physical appearance. When judged on accomplishments alone, an accomplished man is deemed a worthy catch. However, if a man is accomplished but not attractive physically, he will not be deemed especially attractive, but merely average. It seems that physical attractiveness levels the playing field. The unaccomplished men were able to "compete" with the accomplished men simply because they were more physically appealing. It seems then, that *handsome is not especially as handsome does*.

By way of example, consider the fictional subject Josh. Josh scored the highest on the control group ratings. Josh is a doctor, which is a respectable and highly paid profession. His title also gives Josh a high status level in western society. His profile mentions that he was volunteering in Africa with HIV patients. This indicates Josh is a kind and socially conscious individual who is capable of doing

good deeds. Furthermore, he cooks, a skill admired in men by most modern women. Josh has creative talent and plays jazz, a sophisticated musical genre generally enjoyed by a music savvy audience. He engages in risky, adventurous sports. He has a sensitive, romantic side and reads French poetry. Unsurprisingly, he was deemed extremely attractive by 90% of the control group.

Only 10% of the experimental group, however, rated Josh as extremely attractive. The reason was because of his photograph. His face is round and not symmetrical. His skin has blemishes. He doesn't have a tan. Overall, he is not conspicuously ugly, but he is not especially good looking either. His appearance detracted from his accomplishments. This dynamic does not mean Josh was rated poorly. He was still considered quite attractive by 35% of the experimental group.

It is pertinent to note that none of the unaccomplished men were considered extremely unattractive (with the exception of Alex). They still had likeable qualities, but they had not accomplished anything of significance socially, financially or educationally. Perhaps the majority of women gave these men the benefit of the doubt and did not want to appear as if they were discriminating against men with menial jobs and little evidence of success. When they were shown to be physically attractive, their attractiveness ratings improved considerably, bolstering their potential as romantic interests.

There are a few limitations in this study that must be considered in evaluating this research:

- The criteria for what constitutes an attractive male face differs considerably culturally and over time. These results cannot be extrapolated universally. Aesthetic standards are also somewhat subjective, depending on the individual.
- The survey was limited to people with internet access. Internet users are not representative of the general population. Having said that, the internet is ubiquitous in today's society and used by a broad range of people. Furthermore, online dating sites have lost their stigma and become socially acceptable means of finding a mate in this society.
- Despite the results, the profiles may be interpreted differently based on the personality type, interests, mood and preferences of the particular woman being surveyed.
- The survey participants may have garnered implied background information or implicit suggestion of character in the profiles that cannot be accounted for.
- The proximity of the women to real men would involve other factors such as pheromones, body type preferences as well as verbal and non-verbal communication. All these factors come into play when determining attractiveness.

This experiment has shown that the proverb *handsome is as handsome does* is not necessarily true today. It may have been true when Chaucer penned it in the

1300s when genteel behaviour was highly desirable. In today's postmodern world, however, chivalry does not impress as it once did. Men today are judged by different standards; they are judged by their accomplishments: how much money they have, what skills they possess, how intelligent they are and where they are in the social hierarchy. There is a suggestion in modern thought that the richest, most accomplished men are perceived as attractive by women, no matter how physically unattractive they are. This is simply not true. Some women may find the money or the power attractive, but not the men themselves. This experiment has shown that good looks are just as important as they ever were when it comes to plain old biological attraction.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY¹

[E-mail content]

You have been selected to participate in research on male attractiveness. Participation in this survey is voluntary, entirely confidential and will only take up a minute of your time. This survey was approved by the Plentyoffish.com administrator, but your participation will not affect your membership with Plentyoffish.com in any way. By participating in this survey, you will have contributed to our understanding of human sexuality. Results of the survey will be available to you after its completion.

Once again, complete confidentiality is assured. Thank you for taking the time to participate.

[A uniquely identifiable link will be provided here to avoid duplication]

[Control group Survey]

Please rate the attractiveness of the following six men on a scale of 1 to 5. These men volunteered to participate in this study. Their names have been altered to protect their identity. Make your choice based on whether you would date them or not.

Peter

Hi there! My name is Peter and I work in finance. In my spare time I volunteer for the Cancer foundation. I'm also working on my masters' thesis part time. I always make time to have fun too. Last summer I climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro. It was a fantastic experience and hopefully I can share some more amazing experiences with you!

How would you rate this man on the attractiveness scale?

1. Extremely attractive
2. Quite attractive
3. Average attractiveness
4. Not very attractive
5. Extremely unattractive

¹ Online version differs significantly in format and layout, as well as interactivity.

John

Hello there ladies! My name is John and I'd love to meet you! I'm currently working as a waiter in a busy downtown restaurant. I don't do a whole lot in my spare time, but I'm thinking about going back to school. I'm looking for somebody who is easy to talk to and who I can have fun with!

How would you rate this man on the attractiveness scale?

1. Extremely attractive
2. Quite attractive
3. Average attractiveness
4. Not very attractive
5. Extremely unattractive

Paul

Hi! Paul is my name and I work in retail selling computers. I like watching TV and hanging out with my friends. I also like to meet people online and talk to them about life and such. I'm a very friendly guy who is looking for a friendly girl to have a good time with.

How would you rate this man on the attractiveness scale?

1. Extremely attractive
2. Quite attractive
3. Average attractiveness
4. Not very attractive
5. Extremely unattractive

Mike

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mike and I run a successful architectural consulting firm. In my spare time I write and have actually had several books published, which I'm really proud of. I love to dance, especially the Salsa, so maybe I can take you out for a spin on the dance floor sometime!

How would you rate this man on the attractiveness scale?

1. Extremely attractive
2. Quite attractive
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4. Not very attractive
5. Extremely unattractive

Alex

I am currently unemployed and have lots of time to kick back and relax. There is nothing more fulfilling in life than listening to some good music and drinking good coffee. I'm also a big Star Trek fan. I'm looking for a girl who I can get along with and who knows a good guy when she sees one.

How would you rate this man on the attractiveness scale?

1. Extremely attractive
2. Quite attractive
3. Average attractiveness
4. Not very attractive
5. Extremely unattractive

Josh

I'm a doctor who has recently returned from a sabbatical in Africa where I worked with HIV patients. I love to cook, especially for somebody special. If I have time, I play piano with my jazz band. I also go paragliding on the weekends and try to keep up with my study of French poetry.

How would you rate this man on the attractiveness scale?

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[Experimental group Survey]

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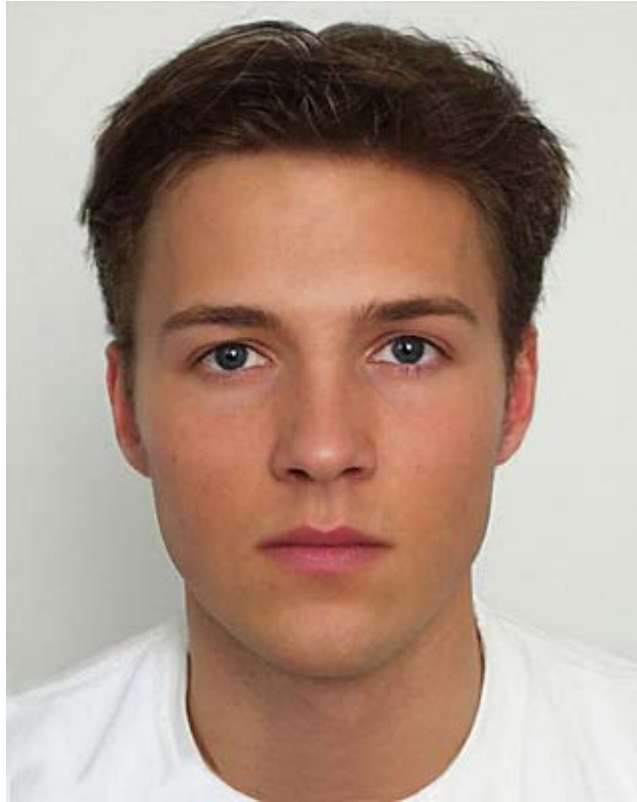
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